BACKGROUNDER NO. 1-0017
LARRY FREUND/BELGRADE

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BALKAN CONFERENCE PREVIEW

ANNCR:

REPRESENTATIVES FROM YUGOSLAVIA, TURKEY, BULGARIA AND ROMANIA ARE TRAVELLING TO GREECE FOR MONDAY'S OPENING OF A SPECIAL CONFERENCE OF BALKAN NATIONS. A BACKGROUND REPORT ON THE MEETING BY VOA CORRESPONDENT LARRY FREUND IN BELGRADE.

VOICE:

THE BALKAN AREA WAS ONCE FRONT-PAGE NEWS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD. ITS REPUTATION AS "THE POWDER KEG OF EUROPE" HAS NOT VANISHED COMPLETELY. BUT THE PAST DECADE HAS FOCUSED ATTENTION ELSEWHERE IN EUROPE AND THE WORLD. NEVERTHELESS, LEADERS IN THE AREA SEE THE BALKANS AS STILL A POTENTIALLY TROUBLESOME REGION. A MAP CHARTING THE ETHNIC MAKE-UP OF THE BALKANS RESEMBLES A PATCHWORK QUILT, WITH MINORITIES SHADING ACROSS THE SHARP OUTLINES OF POLITICAL BOUNDARIES.

THE POLITICAL SHADINGS ARE EVEN MORE STRIKING: BULGARIA AND ROMANIA, BOTH MEMBERS OF THE WARSAW PACT, BUT ROMANIA PURSUING ITS OWN INDEPENDENCE WAYS AND BULGARIA CLOSELY TIED TO THE SOVIET UNION; GREECE AND TURKEY ARE BOTH MEMBERS OF THE ATLANTIC ALLIANCE, BUT BOTH HAVE SHARP ARGUMENTS WITH EACH OTHER AND WITH THE UNITED STATES; YUGOSLAVIA IS NON-ALIGNED AND ANXIOUS TO PURSUE GOOD RELATIONS WITH ITS NEIGHBORS, BUT HAS INDULGED IN SHARP POLEMICS WITH BULGARIA; AND ALBANIA, CHINA'S EAST EUROPEAN ALLY, HAS BEEN MAKING OCCASIONAL FRIENDLY OVERTURES TO GREECE AND YUGOSLAVIA, BUT HAS ALSO ATTACKED YUGOSLAVIA FOR ITS UNORTHODOX COMMUNISM.

FIVE OF THE SIX NATIONS ON THE BALKAN PENINSULA HAVE AGREED TO SEND REPRESENTATIVES TO THE BALKAN CONFERENCE PROMOTED BY GREEK PRIME MINISTER KONSTANTINE CARAMANLIS. ALBANIA HAS TURNED DOWN ITS INVITATION. THE MEETING, EXPECTED TO LAST TEN DAYS, OPENS ON MONDAY (1-26) IN ATHENS WITH AN ADDRESS BY MISTER CARAMANLIS. THE PARTICIPANTS WILL BE ON THE SUB-MINISTERIAL LEVEL, AND THE OFFICIAL AGENDA FOR THE PRIVATE MEETINGS INCLUDES RELATIVELY NON-CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS WHERE AGREEMENT IS ALREADY REGARDED AS LIKELY -- TRADE, TRANSPORTATION, TELECOMMUNICATIONS, AND ENERGY.

BUT CLEARLY, AT LEAST SOME OF THE PARTICIPATING COUNTRIES ARE HOPEFUL THAT IF AGREEMENT IS REACHED ON THOSE PRACTICAL MATTERS, THERE CAN BE FURTHER STEPS TOWARD BALKAN COOPERATION AND STABILITY. ONE BELGRADE WEEKLY HAS SUGGESTED THAT AGREEMENT OF FIVE STATES TO TAKE PART IN THE MEETING MAY SIGNIFY READINESS FOR THE SETTLEMENT OF OTHER OUTSTANDING QUESTIONS AS WELL. AT THE SAME TIME, THE YUGOSLAV MAGAZINE POINTS OUT THAT SOME OF THOSE OUTSTANDING QUESTIONS BETWEEN THE BALKAN STATES WILL ALSO INHIBIT THE ATHENS MEETING.

BULGARIAN ACCEPTANCE OF THE INVITATION FROM PRIME MINISTER CARAMANLIS SUGGESTS TO SOME OBSERVERS THAT THE SOVIET UNION IS NOW INTERESTED IN THE POTENTIAL OF SUCH MEETINGS. FURTHER EVIDENCE OF SOVIET INTEREST IN THE BALKANS WAS SEEN DURING THE VISIT TO TURKEY EARLIER THIS MONTH BY SOVIET PRIME MINISTER ALEKSEI KOSYGIN, AND THE RECENT SOVIET INVITATIONS TO ALL FIVE NATIONS PARTICIPATING IN THE BALKAN CONFERENCE TO SEND OBSERVERS TO MILITARY MANEUVERS EARLY NEXT

MONTH NEAR THE SOVIET-TURKISH BORDER. THE YUGOSLAV PRESS HAS WARNED IN COMMENTARIES ON THE BALKAN MEETING THAT BALKAN AFFAIRS ARE SOLELY A MATTER FOR COUNTRIES IN THE BALKANS, AND AS ONE JOURNAL HAS PUT IT, FOREIGN INTERFERENCE WOULD FUNDAMENTALLY IMPEDE INTER-BALKAN COOPERATION.

THE BALKAN MEETING HAS BEEN WIDELY DESCRIBED AS A FRUIT OF LAST SUMMER'S EUROPEAN SECURITY CONFERENCE SUMMIT IN HELSINKI. GREEK OFFICIALS SEE THE ATHENS MEETING AS ONE OF THE FIRST PRACTICAL RESULTS OF THAT EUROPEAN SUMMIT. AND COMMENTATORS HERE (IN YUGOSLAVIA) SAY THE MEETING SHOULD BE SEEN NOT AS THE END BUT THE BEGINNING OF A PROCESS.

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